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THE CHOICE

By Esther B. Fein

CAROL A. BARKALOW KEEPS the five frayed diaries on the floor by her bed, half expecting that she might turn over one night and scribble in some new thoughts. It was nine years ago when she cracked the binding on the first small red book and wrote, in the meticulous handwriting of someone starting something new and remarkable, "July 7, 1976 — What a Day!"

It was a historic day, a day when Carol Barkalow became one of the first 119 young women to enter the United States Military Academy at West Point, a school that had thrived as the all-male preserve of the Army career officer for 174 years. And now, after four years at the Academy and five years in the military, Captain Barkalow still skims the diaries and assesses her growth from an awkward young cadet who broke the zipper in her pants on her first day at West Point to a polished officer and woman.

Linda T. Garcia, in the same year Carol Barkalow entered West Point, became a member of the first class of women at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Occupying a proud place on her living-room wall is a framed collage of photographs: Linda in the cockpit of a T-41; Linda as a freshman in her starched "doolie" uniform; Linda with her saber in its sheath and her hand raised, being sworn in as an officer by her father, a retired Air Force major.

"I'm often asked would I do it again," says Captain Garcia. "Yes. Without hesitation."

Scattered about the den in Elizabeth Belzer Semcken's house are scrapbooks and mementos from her days as a member of the class of 1980 at the Naval Academy at Annapolis. There are also models of fighter planes that her husband, John, a Navy pilot, has flown. But the room is cluttered mostly with pictures of their bright-faced daughter, Rebecca, whom Liz reluctantly leaves with a baby sitter when she goes to work for the Navy each morning.

"To the world, being in the first class was probably the most significant thing I've done," says Lieutenant Semcken. "But in my own life, there's no question — it's Rebecca."

Nine years ago these three officers were among 357 women who, by lugging their duffel bags and books onto the campuses of the United States service academies, made history. And now these women are poised once again at a juncture where women have never stood. This month they will complete the five years of military service they committed to when they entered the academies, and they must decide either to stay in the military or leave it, to continue their careers as officers or begin them anew as businesswomen. What they do will shed light on questions many consider crucial for the United States armed services: Can women succeed in today's military? Do women really want careers as officers in the military, and does the military really want women officers?

"Where they go and what they do will in many ways measure the military's success at integrating and promoting women," says Lieut. Gen. Robert E. Kelley, vice commander of Tactical Air Command at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, and a former superintendent of the Air Force Academy. "We are working very hard to eliminate institutional biases in the military, and certainly admitting women to the academies is a measure of that. But we have to look at whether these women decide to stay or leave and ask ourselves, 'Are we doing enough to create an environment in which women feel they can reach their potential?' "

Carol Barkalow, Linda Garcia and Elizabeth Belzer Semcken are representative of the dozens of women from the class of 1980 who were interviewed for this article. Each of the three has strong emotional ties to military service and her academy experience, but each is questioning what place the military will have in her future. One says she will leave, one plans to stay, one is still painfully unsure. The decisions the three ultimately make will not only reveal the mood of the class as a whole, but will say much about whether the military has been successful in incorporating women into its ranks.

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The prevailing opinion that military leaders express publicly, however, is that the combat-exclusion rule will not hinder the promotion of women, that women commanding noncombatant units, heading multimillion-dollar procurement offices and leading intelligence forces will forge through the ranks and garner their stars. Most of the generals and Defense Department officials that were interviewed hedged on the subject of whether the combat-exclusion rule might be repealed by noting that the rule was a Congressional mandate reflecting the will of the public; they added that no other country allowed women to serve in combat in its regular armed services.

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LINDA GARCIA HAS always known the isolation of military life. She shuttled as a child from Air Force base to Air Force base, as her father, Juan, pursued his career as a pilot, and her mother, Sally, struggled to keep making new homes for her five children. She fondly tells how close her family became, drawing on each other's strength and friendship to feel comfortable in strange places. But now that she is faced with the possiblity of repeating that pattern in her adult life, Linda Garcia also remembers the childhood feelings of having "had no roots."

When she was a student at the Air Force Academy, she wrote a song about how lonely life could get with her father away so often, and how her mother had to care for the children alone.

Well Dad was gone when
we were small
but we didn't understand.
Mom took his place and
carried on
the job she did was grand.
Those lonely years she
struggled on
and never once com-
plained.
She did it all with love and
joy
and never showed the
pain.

"One of the problems in military life is that immediate family kinship is very strong, but the family network is not there," says Captain Garcia, recounting that she was born in Louisana and raised in Texas, Puerto Rico, Florida and Massachusetts. "In the past couple of years, it hit me hard that I don't have any roots, and I wonder what kind of impact that would have on the family I hope to have someday."

Captain Garcia, a Latin America analyst with the Tactical Air Command at Langley Air Force Base, thrives on her family. Her conversations are peppered with comments about her youngest sister, Mara, a freshman at the Air Force Academy and "a super, super woman," her two brothers, Juan Jr. and Luis ("They are so good looking"), and her older sister, Amanda, an Air Force captain and "my best friend." And, always, there is mention of her parents, who finally settled down after her father retired as a major from the Air Force and moved the family to Colorado Springs.

It was her father, says Captain Garcia, who, when she was considering submitting her resignation five months ago, encouraged her to give the Air Force another year. Over a long-distance phone conversation from her apartment in Arlington, Va., where she was working as an analyst for the Defense Intelligence Agency, she and her father discussed her qualms about military life and the offers she was starting to receive from private corporations.

"He helped me to realize that, in all honesty, I couldn't resign my commission and say I didn't like the Air Force because I had never actually been stationed on a base," says Captain Garcia, who was assigned to Washington after her graduation and served in various intelligence positions there before moving to Langley last December.

By accepting the transfer within a year of completing her five-year commitment, she incurred additional time, because officers are required to remain in a post for at least a year. Other women from the class of 1980 have also deferred their decisions by accepting recent transfers or by extending their commitment to the military in exchange for time at graduate school.

"Each option has its fears," says Captain Garcia, now 26 years old. "When I think of private industry, I wonder, 'Will I make it? Will I be bored?' If I remain, there's the uncertainty about my next assignment. I really enjoy what I'm doing now, but what about the next job? Ultimately, it comes down to, 'What do I want to be when I grow up?' But along the way, I'm also feeling a lot of pressure from people who've followed my career, people who say, 'Linda, you can be a general.' "

There are currently three female generals in the Air Force, compared with 340 men; four female generals in the Army, compared with 408 men, and two female commodores, the equivalent of a one-star general, in the Navy, compared with 129 men. (There are 122 male admirals and no women of that rank.) Still, some people who have tracked Linda Garcia believe she can attain the rank of general. Many are members of the Hispanic community, proud of her accomplishments as the daughter of a Mexican-American and a Puerto Rican-American. Her achievements inspired the Mexican American Opportunity Foundation to name her Woman of the Year in 1980. The following year, she was named Woman of the Year by the National Conference of Puerto Rican Women.

One of her assignments at the Department of Defense was a six-month project for the Secretary of Defense coordinating the creation of a commemorative stamp honoring Hispanics who had served in America's armed forces. As part of that job, she brought together the 10 surviving Hispanic Americans who have been awarded the Medal of Honor, wrote speeches for senior defense officials, maintained a liaison with the White House and coordinated receptions and luncheons, including one at the White House last October, when President Reagan unveiled the stamp. "The Academy gave me the self-confidence and the polish to handle that," says Captain Garcia.

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She notes that the national-level jobs she has held are "highly unusual" for a junior officer. Another of her tasks at the Pentagon was analyzing Argentina's military capabilities during the Falklands crisis. "I've seen the big picture," she says. "High-level decisions were based on what I had done. I briefed the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff — as a second lieutenant — talking ad hoc about missile fighters. To this day it blows my mind." She admits, however, that starting in such visible and prestigious jobs has a disadvantage. It creates a feeling of "nowhere to go but down."

"She's unusually composed for a junior officer," says Gen. Robert E. Kelley of the Langley Air Force Base, who requested that Captain Garcia be transferred to Langley after she introduced herself to him at a convention in Washington. "She walked right up to me and made a pitch for a job," he recalls. "She's got that get up and go. That says a lot about her."

That quality — that "enthusiasm, moxie and chutzpah," as General Kelley calls it — has not escaped the civilian companies and business people that Captain Garcia has come across as an officer. Captain Garcia is very reluctant to discuss specifically the companies that have contacted her or what kind of offers they have made, fearing that to be so candid would "burn the bridges" if she decides to remain in the Air Force.

"I am looking around; I will be passing out my résumé soon," she says. She does say that most of the companies that have demonstrated an interest "are high-technology, some with Government contracts," and mentions that one such company in Colorado Springs called and said, "You want engineering? You got it. You want accounting? You got it? Management? It's yours."

"The problem is," she says, readily admitting that she enjoys the attention, both corporate and military, "I don't know what I want to do and that's scary."

For the time being, Linda Garcia is mulling over the offers she receives, and by summer, she expects to "sit down and physically make a list" of the pros and cons of staying and leaving. "If I stay in, I sure do think ahead to being a general," she says, speaking with the self-assuredness that landed her the job at Langley. "I don't want to sound conceited, but I have a good start and there's no reason I couldn't. But the opportunities are just, well, frightening. When we were in the Academy, they told us being a cadet would open doors. We said 'Sure.' You know what? They were right."

Esther B. Fein is a reporter for The Times.

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